

Memoirs of an Aurelian

By NIGEL WYKES *

(Concluded from page 233)

To strike a more cheerful note, I turn now to two species which, when the chance offered (and would still offer), provided a most welcome treat on the rare occasions when scholastic duties did not keep me chained to the classroom. For the Wood White and the Duke of Burgundy were both to be found within reasonable distance, and the only doubt was if the weather would match the opportunity. Between the Wars the Wood White was not uncommon in lightly wooded areas on either side of the Surrey-Sussex border, flying slowly and gracefully along paths and damp wayside verges and appearing in the last stages of exhaustion, though this impression was deceptive, since, in the large and often thinly populated districts where it occurs, it often has to fly great distances before it meets its mate. One year I caught a Spring Female which layed a number of eggs on the Meadow Pea (*Lathyrus pratensis*) and bred a few of the Summer brood. I note that Frohawk gives the Tuberous Pea (*Orobus tuberosus*) as the usual foodplant, but this can hardly be the case, since it is an extremely rare plant in Britain found only in one locality. In recent years the Pea family has engaged the attention of the botanists, and now seems all to come under the genus *Lathyrus* (unless they have lately decided otherwise), but the Wood White will almost certainly accept any member of the family for breeding purposes. The other butterfly mentioned as a possible quarry on a spare half-holiday, namely the Duke of Burgundy, is apt to be found in much the same type of habitat as the Wood White, but is more difficult to collect. The sombre colouring of the upperside makes its short rapid flight almost impossible to follow, and the variegated pattern of the underside provides a most effective camouflage when it is at rest. For these reasons the species may well be established in many places where it is seldom reported, but inevitably it has to move its quarters when the light woodland grows up and chokes the Primrose and Cowslip on which the larva feeds. Personally I have not been able to make any reliable estimate of its distribution, but I would say that it may still be found in most large woodland areas of Southern Britain, certainly as far North as the Midlands. Here in Dorset it occurs today sporadically but not in large numbers within three miles of my house, but I seldom see it, perhaps because at my age bi-focal spectacles do not readily bridge the gap between close and more distant moving objects.

In addition to the two species mentioned above, there were others which could not be found in the Thames Valley but were available in numbers not far away. I can recall many happy hours on various heathlands where the Silver-studded Blue was common. First introduced to it while in O.T.C. camp at Aldershot. I noticed the tendency of the females towards the

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form known as 'sagittata', in which the marginal black and orange crescents of the hindwing are extended inwards; and many years later, much nearer home, I found what I had been looking for in the form of an ultra-radiata aberration as extreme as any that I have seen in British collections. Later I took a good series of the larger and more brilliant chalk race in some Kentish woods where there was a small clearing which, I imagine, was once part of the Downs; but unfortunately was never able to penetrate as far as North Wales for the var. *caernensis*, and searched the Northern Mosses in vain for the apparently extinct var. *masseyi*. But the Silver-studded Blue is still common in many places, and I was pleased to see a thriving colony in East Dorset last summer while in search of a glimpse of the Dartford Warbler. Quite close to the same area the Lulworth Skipper is still locally plentiful, though I have not looked for it since the day when it swarmed on the precipitous slopes of Corfe Castle; but I expect there are a good many places between Bridport and Swanage where it may be found. While on the subject of Skippers, it seems that the Silver-spotted has recently been on the decrease, and I suspect that this may be due to some extent to the reduction in the Rabbit population, which kept the grass down to the level that this Skipper seems to prefer. I first came across it at Royston in 1925, shortly after the Coridon Gold Rush had ended, and there was no longer a hungry dealer hovering round every large clump of Horseshoe Vetch. There were plenty of Skippers there then in late August, and it is still widely distributed over the chalk Downs, though curiously absent from many suitable localities. I wish I could say the same about the Adonis Blue which, surely one of the most brilliant of the European Lycaenidae, has disappeared from many places where it used to be common. Fifty years ago it was abundant on a number of Downs to which I was occasionally able to pay a fleeting Spring visit in search of the 'ceronus' form of the female, which seemed to me brightest and most common in the Cotswolds. The second brood attracted many collectors, especially to the Kentish localities, where some remarkable aberrations, including most curious colour variations of the male uppersides, used to occur, though it was never my good fortune to find one. Here in Dorset it still persists locally in fair numbers in the East of the county, and I have seen the odd specimen at the extreme West end of the chalk plateau only two miles from my house. Let us hope that by careful conservation its decline will be arrested. Of the Holly Blue, on the other hand, I can report a most welcome regeneration, after a long period of inexplicable rarity; in fact, I had not seen it for at least ten years, but in 1976 a friend in this village told me, to my great surprise, that she had seen a blue butterfly in early April, and shortly afterwards I found quite a large number flying round our numerous Holly trees. In July I watched a female depositing on Ivy buds, and next year there were again plenty about. I only hope that the recent

very cold winter, which has brought severe and prolonged frost to Dorset, will not prove too much of a set-back. The Small Copper too has caused some anxiety over the past ten years, and my impression is that it is much less common than it used to be. In the past it was worth while to search for the aberration with no orange on the hindwing and for those with blue spots inside the orange hindwing border, but nowadays one hardly finds it in sufficient quantity. I only once found a striking aberration, a radiated form illustrated on Plate 3 of Baron de Worms' book on the butterflies of Wiltshire. Except for the Common Blue which is as abundant everywhere as it always was, and for the Chalkhill Blue which is discussed at length later, the only Lycaenid left for consideration is the Large Blue. Here, as almost everyone interested in butterflies will know, there is a sad story to tell, since it must be not far from extinction in Britain. Twenty-five years ago it was still comparatively plentiful in a few places along the North Devon coast, but several disastrous fires, probably much more damaging than excessive collecting, are said practically to have wiped it out, and attempts at recolonisation so far are not meeting with much success. Perhaps it still occurs in small numbers in the Cotswolds (where I took half a dozen of the large dark form in the 1930s), and apparently there is an inland Devon locality where it has a secure foothold. One would like to think that, now it is a protected species, it will be safe from further reduction, but personally I am doubtful, since there are almost certainly natural factors outside our control which threaten its survival. It is, of course, a curious insect, not only for its symbiosis with ants, but also for its odd habits of flight, which seem to be confined to short periods during the day, while at other times not a single specimen may be seen. But perhaps some encouragement may be taken from the fact that it has been known to shift its quarters from time to time and turn up in some new locality, not necessarily in the same neighbourhood, provided that there are anthills with Thyme growing over them, as it appears to have done, according to Edward Newman, in Gloucestershire, Devon, and even Northamptonshire in the mid-19th century. It would seem that all four European species of *Maculinea* are somewhat capricious and unpredictable in their distribution and appearance, and for this reason I would not presume to suggest that our own 'arion' is doomed for ever.

Another of our species which during my lifetime has behaved in an oddly irregular way is the Comma. A hundred years ago it was reported to occur in at least twenty-five counties of England and Wales, but by the time I started serious collecting it was hardly known outside the Wye Valley. I first came across it most unexpectedly while visiting a house in Bedfordshire whose owner, knowing something of butterflies, said that it regularly came to his Buddleias and might be there that July day. So I went to look and found two specimens. Ten years later it had spread across South England, and I remem-

ber particularly a day in the New Forest when we found some newly emerged males sunning themselves on the Bracken (as there was nothing else to sit on) and sparkling like jewels in their brilliant orange dress. It is still widely distributed today, though I fancy it is less common than it was, perhaps because extensive beds of Nettles are now so summarily dealt with by modern pesticides and weed-killers. This no doubt is also the reason for the reduction in numbers of other Nymphalines which have the same foodplant; and I found another similar example two years ago, when a fine brood of Painted Lady larvae was wiped out by a farmer who, reasonably enough, was trying to eradicate Spear-plume Thistles from his land.

No mention has yet been made in this paper of our Satyrids, and, to tell the truth, they have never interested me greatly. But I have a few memories which may rouse the reader to a feeling of protest at my indifference. The Northern species were normally outside my range, though I spent two days climbing up and down the Langdale Pikes in incessant rain (naturally seeing no sign of the Mountain Ringlet), and by the time I went to live in Cumberland for six years I had given up collecting. However, I had better luck with the Scotch Argus, visiting its Westmorland locality early one August and finding it in abundance and newly emerged. Otherwise my experience has been confined to the Southern species, all of which have not been difficult to obtain. There were successful searches for the 'blind' variety of the Ringlet, and a short time ago I was walking down a Dorset lane and saw an extreme specimen of the very rare ab. *lanceolata* sitting on a Bramble flower; but, as I had no net with me it flew away perhaps to be parent to other such freaks of nature. In this part of Dorset the Marbled White is often the commonest butterfly in July both on the Downs and, to my surprise, in woodland clearings; but I have never seen the faintest semblance of variation in any of its localities, even when it has occurred in vast numbers. I always used to find pleasure in watching the Grayling, both the chalk and the heath races, and would have liked to go in search of the special Northern forms. The Gatekeeper is often abundant flying along the high hedges which flank our lanes and swarms in our woodlands, but I have only rarely seen a specimen with extra spots on the forewing, which are a regular feature in some places in Devon. The Speckled Wood is found everywhere in the West country, even in my garden, and usually is on the wing throughout the season in successive broods; but the Small Heath is apparently not so ubiquitous as it used to be, but it is such an inconspicuous insect that one often does not even notice it.

I have left to the last in this paper my experiences with three species that have made an indelible mark on my memory. The first is the Large Tortoiseshell. Though apparently common enough in many places last century, it became increasingly rare, and I did not see a single specimen until after the Second World War, though collections made before about 1910 had

drawers full of them. But in 1946 I heard that, perhaps because woodlands were often neglected during the War, quite a large number had been seen in the Suffolk woods, and, despite the appalling winter we had that year, I decided to make an attack on this elusive quarry. Not having a car. I bicycled to Slough station, took a train to London, rode on my two good wheels from Paddington to Liverpool Street, and set off for Suffolk. I had been given detailed instructions on how to find the woods, and find them I did with a carpet of the rather rare Oxlip in full flower — a sight worth the journey, even if no butterflies appeared. After only a brief search I saw a large ochreous-brown object fluttering round a tree-trunk and settling now and then to have a sun-bath, and it turned out to be a female Large Tortoiseshell with its body clearly bursting with eggs. This was a most fortunate chance, since the difficulty with these species that only pair after hibernation and then usually lay their eggs in one large cluster is to find a female at just the right moment. I put her in a pill-box, and spent the rest of the day pursuing some ten specimens (all males, I think) which had to be stalked cunningly when they settled on the warm ground; but none was worth collecting, as the rough winter had left them worn and chipped. On returning home the next day, having spent a night sleeping on a mattress *on top* of a bath (the only accommodation that the village could provide — an interesting but hardly comfortable experience), I constructed a large cylindrical cage of stout wire and covered it with muslin. The insect had been given several good feeds of sugar and water, and I put the cage over a clump of Elm suckers in my garden. Despite regular feeding she died after a fortnight apparently without laying. Accordingly the cage was removed, but a week or two later I was astounded and delighted to see a large family of newly hatched larvae on the top of a branch. The eggs had been laid in rings round the main stem concealed by the leaves and extremely difficult to see. The cage was put back at once, before any predators could get at them, and fed up quickly and without accident. When about the end of June they started leaving the web, they were removed to suitable cages indoors where there was sufficient roof-space for them to hang up for pupation. They began to emerge in mid-July, about eighty in all, of which I released a fair number in the hope that they would breed on the numerous old Elms (all now dead) in the Eton playing-fields. But nothing came of this experiment, and I never saw any of them again. None the less it was an exciting adventure and most satisfactory to have a large series of specimens, all perfect but not varying in the smallest detail.

The second species to engage my attention over some twenty years was the Purple Emperor. Realising the extreme unlikelihood of taking the imago in good condition (if indeed at all), I first tried beating for the larvae, but soon abandoned this method, since I found that they were not at all easy to dislodge except while moulting, and if disturbed during this

process they almost invariably died. So recourse was had to searching the Sallows in May — a long and difficult business — long, because one often examined dozens of bushes and trees without result, and difficult, because the larvae concealed themselves carefully by lying along the mid-rib of the leaf in such a way that their light green lateral lines exactly corresponded with the side-veins of the leaf. But with patience and practice I got better at the job, and recommend the following points to the collector who is prepared to try his hand and eye. First, I have found that the ova are normally laid at about eye-level on leaves near the outer edge of the bush and protected from hot sunshine and enemies by overhanging branches, and that the larvae, until almost full-fed, do not stray far from their hibernating position. Secondly, the best way to find them is to look for signs of feeding where the outer edges of the leaves are eaten away, sometimes with only the mid-rib left. Thirdly, the larva must never be disturbed, but, when they are located, the whole twig should be put into a collecting tin (not box) and later placed intact in the breeding cage. Further, when a fresh supply of food is needed, the leaf on which the larva is resting should be detached and tied on the new branch, so that it can move when it feels like it; it should never in any circumstances be pulled off its silken pad. For pupation the larva turns a light bluish-green and becomes restless, usually spinning itself on to the roof of the cage but sometimes on the back of a leaf, where it is very hard to see; in fact, I only once found a pupa in the wild. About twelve hours before emergence it begins to turn dark, and, if you wish to be present at the birth, you will be well-advised to get up at dawn to witness a fascinating and rewarding event. In the course of hundreds of hours spent searching Sallows, chiefly and most profitably in West Sussex, Oxfordshire, and Northants, I must have found at least fifty larvae, mostly singly but once eight on one bush, which emerged in the proportion of about three males to one female. On the wing I caught only two males and two females, none in perfect condition, and only possible by the use of a net on a fifteen-foot Bamboo, a very clumsy and usually ineffective contraption. Sometimes the imago may be taken settled on wet mud or muck or decomposing matter, but I was never fortunate enough to find one. But, if you are lucky enough to live near suitable woodlands, the insects may be attracted by almost anything that reflects the sun, such as a window or a greenhouse or even a tea-cup (as a friend of mine found last summer). In general, I think we may say that this royal and splendid insect has more than held its own against the threats of encroaching civilisation (so-called), and my impression is that it has become increasingly less rare than it was fifty years ago.

I come finally to the species which has attracted enormous numbers of collectors and has given endless pleasure in the search for aberrations. I refer, of course, to the Chalkhill Blue, which without question varies more than any other

species. As a harmless pastime during the latter part of July and through August there is everything to be said for it, since it does not materially affect the numbers of the butterflies; it does no damage to property, and it takes the collector to the most beautiful Downland in Southern England, carpeted (when not grazed, as alas, it often is nowadays) with a rich assortment of wild flowers such as Scabious, Clustered Bellflower, Pyramidal Orchis, Betony, Hawkbit, Salad Burnet, Thyme, Dwarf Thistle, and many others. The butterfly is widely distributed over such areas, provided that there are extensive mats of Horseshoe Vetch for the larvae to feed on; but, abundant though it often is, for some curious reason it is only in certain restricted localities that it is subject to more than very occasional and then only slight variation. Nobody can be sure why this should be so, and I can think of many places on the South Downs where in the huge colonies the individuals are virtually identical. But in the opinion of many experts, variation is associated with decadence (due perhaps to disease or interbreeding), and, when a colony, such as at Royston in the 1920s and the Downs behind Brighton ten years later, loses its virility and begins to decline, startling aberrations may appear. The subject is too large to be discussed in detail in this paper, and in any case it has already been dealt with in special monographs. But, when I say that I myself produced a series of illustrations running to 250 aberrations and had not then by any means come to the end of them, it clearly constitutes a vast field of inquiry. To give a rough outline of the range of variation, one may say that the male uppersides have been known to differ in colour from almost totally black, through various shades of green and blue, to a pale silvery bluish-white, and the undersides show marked difference of ground-colour from brown, grey, ochreous, to dead white, together with almost every combination of spots joined to form streaks of black, or alternately an absence of spots leading to the disappearance of all but the discoidal mark on both wings. The female uppersides are typically reddish-brown with faint orange lunules round the border, but they may be partly or almost wholly suffused with blue scales; and the undersides are subject to the same variations as in the males, except that the ground-colour is normally reddish-brown with white-ringed black spots and conspicuous orange border lunules. During some twenty-five years of exploration of most of the prolific colonies on the South Downs I did manage to find a number of striking aberrations (a few of them unique), most of which are now at South Kensington, but, in order to achieve this modest result, I must have examined hundreds of thousands of specimens. There can be no question that certain forms of aberration have been principally, if not exclusively, confined to particular localities; for instance, the most wholly melanic form of the male (ab. *pulla*), in which not only all the upper wings, including the fringes, are a dark smoky grey, but also the body, legs, and antennae, was only taken (and then

sparingly) at Shoreham and (very rarely) at Folkestone and in one place on the Salisbury Downs. The other wholly or partly black male form (ab. *melaina*), resulting from the inward extension of the typical black border, was never found, as far as I know, except at Shoreham. Again, the form of the male in which the black outer border is replaced by white (ab. *fowleri*) was first found near Swanage, and is still seen not uncommonly in Dorset, but hardly anywhere else. Similarly, in the female the uppersides in which the blue scales extend from the base to the apex of the cell (ab. *semi-syngrapha*) was practically confined to Royston, and the completely blue form (ab. *syngrapha*) has rarely been taken outside the Wiltshire Downs, one locality in Gloucestershire, and one in the Chilterns. On the other hand the aberrations of the underside in both sexes, common enough almost everywhere in their minor forms such as *arcuata*, *costajuncta*, *basi-juncta*, etc., are exceedingly rare in their extreme forms such as *radiata*, *sagittata*, *digitata*, *striata*, *extrema*, and *alba-caeca*, but they very occasionally turn up in almost any locality which supports a large population and tends towards variation. At the present day many of the colonies formerly well-known for their aberrations have disappeared either under the plough (especially the troughs between the slopes, where the butterflies used to congregate in vast numbers to feed on the flowers or roost for the night), or through grazing and the use of pesticides and fertilisers, or through the decrease of rabbits which prevented the long grass from choking out the Horeshoe Vetch, or through the encroachment of buildings right up to, or even on, the Downs. But it would be idle to maintain that the species is seriously threatened, since there are still many thriving colonies to be seen (among them one not a mile from my house), and one may still watch the males dancing in their hundreds round the flower-heads, and in the later afternoon marvel at the brilliant iridescence of their wings as they catch the last rays of the sun before settling down for the night. Perhaps we are lucky still to be able to enjoy such simple but rewarding pleasures, though for how much longer I would not dare to prophesy.

In this account I have tried to give some impression of what the study and pursuit of British butterflies may mean to an amateur in such spare time as may have been allowed over a period of some sixty years. During this time I amassed a substantial number of specimens, but in 1960, when I had to move to a smaller house in an unpromising locality with little prospect of adding anything but the occasional aberration, I thought it best to dispose of the entire collection and concentrate in future on recording my observations in the form of pictures. The purely scientific reproduction of insects set out like museum specimens did not satisfy my aesthetic sense; so I turned to the idea of depicting wild flowers with insects as far as possible in a natural setting. Since then I must have produced at least five hundred of such studies, but it is still

easy to walk along the Dorset lanes and grassland and heath, and bring back material for a picture. The small and simple subjects can be done in a couple of days, but the larger composite pieces showing several different wild flowers and insects (e.g. butterflies, moths, bees, dragonflies, etc.) often will need up to a fortnight's work. I shall go on doing this as long as my faculties and senses permit, and I look back with unflinching gratitude to the day when I first saw Frohawk occupied with the incomparable illustrations for his great work. Between us we have spanned more than a century of devotion to our British butterflies, and I do not think our time has been wasted.

DIGITIVALVA PERLEPIDELLA (STANTON) IN EAST KENT. — On the 19th May 1979 at St. Margarets, Kent I was delighted to find a larval mine of *D. perlepidella* (St.) on *Inula conyzae*. This very local species has been recorded from several new localities in recent years (e.g. *Ent. Record*, **88**: 212 and *Ent. Record* **90**: 125), but I think that it has not previously been recorded from East Kent. — J. ROCHE, 2 Longtye Drive, Chestfield, Whitstable, Kent.

A CORRECTION. — This Volume 91, p. 126, line 17 from top, read: He (Dr. Jeremy Holloway) has recorded no less than almost 100 species, not "almost 200 species" as stated. — C. G. M. DE WORMS.

GLYPHIPTERYX LATHAMELLA FLETCHER IN KENT.— On July 7th 1979, in Faggs Wood, Orlestone Forest, Kent, I swept from among mixed low herbage at the edge of a ride, a specimen in fair condition of this beautiful moth. I am indebted to Dr. J. D. Bradley for kindly confirming the identification. — N. F. HEAL, 'Fosters', Detling Hill, near Maidstone, Kent. [I am unaware of any previous record for Kent of this local and scarce species. — J.M.C-H.]

THE GOLDEN TWIN-SPOT: CHRYSODEIXIS CHALCITES (ESPER) IN ESSEX. — On the night of 6th/7th October 1979, I had a specimen of this rare immigrant here in my light trap. It is a female in far from fresh condition, and has laid 24 eggs, a few on the leaves of a tomato plant but mostly on the plastic cover of the container. — A. J. DEWICK, Curry Farm, Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex.

CHRYSODEIXIS CHALCITES (ESPER) IN SOUTH GLAMORGAN. — On the 8th October 1979, I took a single female specimen of this exceedingly rare moth in my M.V. trap located in my garden. The moth was kept alive in a breeding cage for a day during which time it deposited approximately 120 eggs. Owing to the fact that little information is evidently available on this species, I would describe the ovum as pale green, inclining to white, and shiny in appearance. It is dome-shaped with ribs radiating from the micropyle at the top down to the base, and reticulated. The ova were laid singly around the cage. — D. R. STEPHENSON, "The Haven", St. Mary Church, Cowbridge, South Glamorgan, South Wales.